

US-backed militia groups now fighting each other in Syria

President Barack Obama's confused strategy in Syria means towns are now being fought over by different US-backed groups

If anywhere can show the consequences of American foreign policy under President Barack Obama, it may be the small town of Marea, north of Aleppo.

In the course of the last five years, it has seen Assad regime tanks roll through from the south, firing shells through its houses.

It has been repeatedly attacked from the east by [Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant](#) (Isil). On occasion it has been bombed from the air by the regime and shelled from the ground by Isil on the same day.

Now its rebel defenders are fighting Isil, the regime, Russian bombers, and a new enemy, the Syrian Kurdish militia the YPG, all at once.

America is calling for a ceasefire. But it is not clear whether even if one were declared, it would stop any of those enemies from attacking Marea.



A member of the Free Syria Army

A "cessation of hostilities" was supposed to come into force on Friday, but the fighting in Marea and everywhere else in [Syria](#) continued. The rebel opposition said on Saturday that it agreed to one "in principle" but was still waiting to see if Russia and the regime would stop bombing.

"The deadline set in Munich for a cessation of hostilities has passed without response from Russia or the regime," its spokesman, Salem al-Meslet, said.

"To date, every time the international community has placed its faith in regime and Russian promises of good faith, the streets of Aleppo, Homs and so many other towns and villages across our country have run red with the blood."

It is not new to say that the war in Syria has become a complex mess, spiralling out of control.

Analysts – and many American diplomats who have left the administration, some in disgust – say that the mess is a consequence of President Obama's decision to support the rebellion against President Bashar al-Assad, but only half-heartedly.

He sent in weapons to support the rebels – including in Marea. But he also refused to confront Russia and

the regime, who had far more weapons, leaving the rebels lightly armed sitting ducks.



President Obama

Then he also [decided to support the Kurds](#). He wanted them to fight Isil, which they did, but they also took on anyone else who stood in the way of a Kurdish mini-state in northern Syria, and that now means rebel areas like Marea, north of Aleppo, which is between that mini-state's western and eastern halves.

As a result, the town is being fought over by two western proxies. It is not surprising that Mr Obama wants a ceasefire.

The YPG is a Kurdish army that is the Syrian affiliate of the long-established guerrillas from

nearby Turkey, the PKK, a leftist, US- and UK-designated terrorist group.

- [Who are the Kurds? A user's guide to Kurdish politics](#)

Despite that designation, the YPG's strength comes in part from its backing from the United States, which gave it air support in its bitter and eventually successful defence against Isil of the border town of Kobane.

But as the YPG attacks rebel-held areas north of Aleppo it is also fighting the very rebel groups who two years ago drove Isil out of western Syria, and who still face off against it just two miles east of Marea.

Last week, there was an Isil attack. "Two days ago, Isil tried to cut the road," Tarek al-Najjar, a local paramedic, told The Telegraph.

The attack failed, even though most of Marea's defenders were on the front line against the YPG just five miles to the west.

If Marea falls – to either the YPG or Isil – it would be a disaster for its embattled inhabitants, but also for the US. For they were at the heart of attempts by the western and Gulf opponents of the Assad regime to build a united opposition.

The man who led the uprising in Marea, a seed merchant called Abdulqader Saleh, was a Salafi Sunni Muslim. The rebel group he put together, Liwa al-Tawhid, eventually became the strongest in Aleppo province.

By stressing its local as well as its religious credentials, it drew recruits from across the board. Its slogans were Islamist but its foot-soldiers were local young men who largely decried the term militant.

For years, Liwa al-Tawhid received strong backing from western allies Turkey and Qatar, and when it came under attack from the regime, received Konkurs anti-tank missiles and other high-end weapons.

But the fact that in Aleppo it was fighting alongside harder-line Islamist groups and even Jabhat al-Nusra, the Syrian al-Qaeda affiliate, made Mr Obama nervous. As soon as regime advances dried up, so, often, did the supply of heavy weapons.

So Liwa al-Tawhid and the other Aleppo rebels were able to cling on to the territory they held – east Aleppo

city and the countryside to the Turkish border – but not win a decisive victory.

That stalemate lasted until the [Russians made their decisive intervention in September](#). On the back of Russian bombing both the regime and now the Kurds have surged forward.

This time, the US response has been to seek peace terms. Its secretary of state, John Kerry, has spent all month trying to persuade the Russians to bring about by negotiation what the rebels have failed to do militarily – drop Mr Assad. He seems to have failed.

On the ground, the fighting has continued. “We are still there, and spirits are good,” said Yasser al-Haji, a relative of Abdulqader Saleh and former captain of the town’s football team. He became a local mini-celebrity organising trips to the area for journalists.

But the civilian and military casualties are intense. “There are 50 injured and 15 dead from every battle,” Mr Najjar, the paramedic, said on Friday night.

“Today, Sheikh Issa to the west was hit by 11 air strikes by the Russians. We evacuated a family, three children were killed and their father, while the mother was injured.”

He said it seemed Syria was being partitioned into Kurdish, Sunni and Alawite areas – the Alawites being the sect to which the Assad family belongs.

If that really is a plan, Turkey is holding out against it, refusing to agree to a Kurdish mini-state. It is now Marea’s only external defender, shelling the YPG from over the nearby border.

It claimed further justification last week after the [suicide bombing of a military convoy in Ankara](#), which was claimed by a PKK splinter faction.

Charles Lister, an analyst who has been involved in European-sponsored negotiations with a wide array of rebel forces, said the fall of Marea and the border town of Azaz to the north would be a “catastrophic morale blow” to them – and also an indication of American policy.

“It is quite extraordinary that Obama administration policy seems to be favouring a Kurdish militia group that is incontrovertibly linked to the terrorism-designated PKK over and above a fellow Nato ally, Turkey,” he said.

In Marea, the hospital has now been evacuated, and contingency plans are being made for a withdrawal to the north.

That would open the way to a new war, this time between the YPG and Isis – one in which the local people, who want neither to rule over them, would have no stake. They say the Americans have abandoned them.

“Some of the Syrian people put their hopes in the Americans, but the Americans have let them down hugely,” said Zakaria Mubarak, a doctor.

“The Americans are like a policeman that passes by the scene of a crime and closes his eyes. That makes them a participant in the crime.”